

The NFO—A Farm Belt Rebel

By Donald Muhm

Michael S. Turner

The book begins with a preface describing the creation of U.S. farm organizations that preceded the National Farmers' Organization (NFO) in 1955. The earliest reference was "Shays Rebellion" centered in Massachusetts in 1786-87. The Grange, American Farm Bureau Federation, and National Farmers' Union, like NFO, remain active today. The author completes the brief review of history by mentioning the "Farm Unity Coalition" (1980s) and "Friends of Agriculture" (1990s). The latter is a response to the industrialization of Iowa's swine industry.

The following chapters are a commentary on leadership within the NFO, including, but not limited to, those who served as presidents of the organization. In addition, there are chapters devoted to significant events that defined NFO. These included holding actions (five chapters), hog kills, court battles (two chapters), and financial struggles.

In journalistic style, the author begins each chapter reminding the reader of salient events and circumstances pertaining to the subject. This, unfortunately, proves to be repetitive and boring for the reader. In the author's defense, much NFO activity was tightly compacted into the organization's early years, making a reporting of its history a challenging undertaking.

Authenticity

The book is a chronological review of NFO. This journalistic treatment of the subject is complete with references to names, places, times, and dates. There are passing references to the prevailing economics of agriculture and farm families, but with limited supporting evidence. It is not a scientific treatment of the economics of agriculture or agricultural markets.

The book focuses on the western Corn Belt with particular emphasis on Iowa and surrounding states for the period 1955 to the mid-1990s. This encompasses a forty-year period containing both good and poor economic times for American agriculture. It is also a slice of history taken from a larger continuum of on-going adjustments faced by family farmers. It is not a unique piece of agricultural history. It is an evolving part of American agriculture, which has always included serious questions of financial

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survivability for some operators. Obviously, questions of economic survivability have waxed and waned during the forty-year history of NFO.

Organizational Leadership

A large portion of the book and the defining events of NFO are devoted to Oren Lee Staley, elected the second president of NFO in December 1955, replacing Harry Gmundman, who had been elected to that office in October of the same year. Staley resigned from his position as president on January 6, 1979, having served for nearly twenty-three years.

Staley is described as a manipulative and secretive leader, who led with an ample dose of demagoguery; a person who employed his considerable oratory skills to motivate audiences, large and small. He was not inclined to share leadership and was quick to exile critics. DeVon Woodland, who successfully emphasized financial management and responsibility (1970-1991), succeeded him as president.

Steven Halloran served as the fourth NFO president (1991-1995). Halloran, with a business degree, emphasized marketing programs for grains, livestock, and milk. Eugene Paul was elected the fifth president of NFO in 1995, with a platform of returning NFO to its basics.

Confrontation with Established Cooperatives

The author describes, in chapters six and seven, NFO's involvement with milk. More precisely, he describes confrontation with pre-existing producer marketing cooperatives, including Lake to Lake, Manitowoc, Wisconsin; Mid-American Dairy Men, Inc., Springfield, Missouri; Associated Milk Producers, Inc., San Antonio, Texas; and Mississippi Valley Milk Producers Cooperative, Davenport, Iowa.

The producer-owned cooperatives were committed to serving dairy farmers with producer-owned processing facilities, branded products, and producer marketing agreements and contracts to coordinate production and processing activities. NFO challenged the producer-owned system by striving to represent producers to their own dairy cooperatives, encouraging dairy farmers to ignore marketing agreements and contracts.

Truman Torgerson, of Lake to Lake Dairy, was an outspoken critic of NFO's lack of business acumen and ethics. The NFO's adversarial approach to producer marketing efforts was in direct contradiction to successful alliances that had been accomplished between producers and their dairy cooperatives based on sound business principles.

What is to be Learned?

Different leadership is appropriate for different times. Visionary, captivating leaders may be appropriate, even necessary for creating new organizations. These are not the qualities required for sustained growth and development. Strategic direction, sound business practices, and development of people quickly become priorities for any organization. Sustainability is also based on a foundation of appropriate experience. Annual elections of a president in NFO's early years represent a significant liability. Likewise, accountability for a chief executive officer is equally critical. An elected board of directors that is knowledgeable and well informed is the more appropriate body in which to vest responsibilities of hiring, evaluating, compensating, and dismissing

management. The elected board of directors should also see that strategic direction is a priority.

The cliché that “necessity is the mother of invention” comes to mind when thoughts turn to development of new cooperatives. Experience tells me to dismiss the cliché. Different times lead to more discussion but few results, particularly successful results. Successful cooperative ventures (beginning or established) need to address real needs of main stream agriculture and/or rural communities. An attempt to appeal to, or focus on, the needs of a fringe group, either producers or rural community residents, has limited potential for success. The limited potential is a reflection of the small population coupled with the transitory nature of the audience. Finally, the failure of a poorly conceived cooperative can seriously undermine efforts to organize other cooperatives in the future.

The book is easy reading, written in Midwestern journalistic style. It is also an interesting glimpse of history for those of us who have celebrated our sixtieth birthdays.